

California's Trophy Brook Trout Hotspots

by Don Vachini

Thrashing violently in the bottom of the net, the thick brook trout painted a vivid spectrum of scarlet and blue flecks with splashes of flaming orange framed around black and white fins. Suspiciously eyeballing the lure that betrayed it, the fish flared its gills, then turned to display a gaping maw which seemed capable of engulfing an entire fist.

Tipping the scales at just under 3 pounds, the High Sierra fish not only rivaled its Canadian cousins but filled the vacant unlimited line-class record with the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame. Indeed, this particular fall backcountry trip proved that California too can produce legendary specks!

Without a doubt, most mountain brook trout caught by anglers in the Golden State will be less than 10 inches, according to Darrell Wong, a fisheries biologist with the Department of Fish and Game in Bishop. Preferring temperatures in the 50- to 55-degree range and water of pristine quality, they are considered a wilderness trout with their range limited by these marginal parameters. However, for residents of the state's monticolous regions, short growing seasons and small food forms usually collaborate to keep them smallish. "Wherever they exist," Wong laments, "they usually show a tendency to be too successful, quite often to the point of stunting."

With the majority of western brookies measured in inches rather than pounds, Wong notes that any resident over a pound is considered trophy-sized. For those anglers seeking indoctrination on trophy char, there are a handful of state waters where growing conditions are conducive to fish achieving this status and more!

While most Golden State brookies are prized for their contrasting colors, more than a dozen waters produce gargantuan-sized char that will test your skills to the fullest.

What is the reason for one specific lake producing trophy-sized lunkers, usually right among waters with profuse, albeit stunted, populations? Wong believes the answer hinges on reproductive habitat. "Simply put, the size and number of brook trout in a water is largely determined by spawning conditions," he said. "Lakes with optimum spawning usually possess exceedingly large numbers of stunted fish, while those with extremely limited or no spawning will often harbor large fish."

Dave Maria, a DFG fisheries biologist who oversees the Shastal/Trinity/Scott Mountain region, points toward lakes with fair-sized meadows surrounding their inlets or outlets as trophy-growing habitat. "In addition to possessing abundant food sources, ideal lakes for growing large brook trout are also deep and lightly pressured," Maria said.

BACKCOUNTRY SIERRA WATERS

Marie Muir Lake, located astride the John Muir Trail in the Bear Creek drainage, and Tomahawk Lake, accessed by scrambling a remote ridgeline in Humphrey's Basin, are vast, forlorn waters nestled at or near

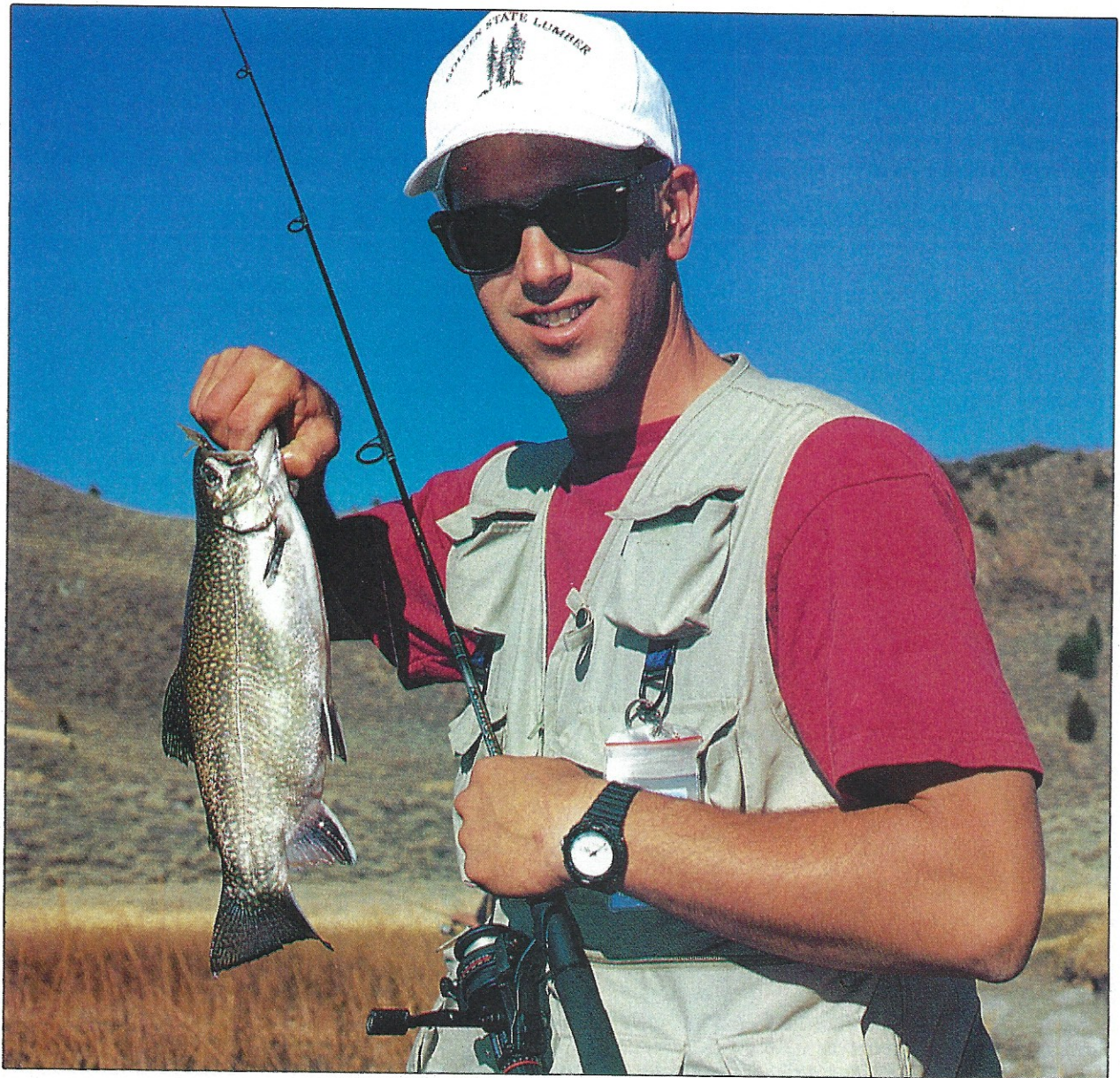
timberline. Overcoming the harsh Eastern Sierra escarpment, I have found them to house specimens in the 12- to 14-inch category, occasionally approaching 2 pounds.

Although tiny, size 0-2 Mepps, Panther Martin and Rooster Tail spinners dredged along the bottom of inlets, outlets and shoals will produce. Herl, pheasant tail, bird's nest, A.P. and bead head nymphs in sizes 14 to 18 best resemble a wide selection of insects and crustaceans on a brook trout's menu. "If what these trout are used to eating is small, that is the size they will readily pursue," Wong points out.

Sitting on the edge between a moderately forested granitic batholith and arid, high desert sage of the Toiyabe National Forest, Poore, Lane and Roosevelt lakes have gained a reputation for producing gargantuan squaretails to 4 pounds. Thanks in part to a generous wooded environment, the trout here benefit from an abundant aquatic food base and additional forage as well. "In these lakes, it is the Lahontan reidside sucker that provides the key ingredient to their brookies topping out near the 1- to 2-pound mark," Wong confides.

Pudgy squaretails in these waters commonly dine on reidside concentrations early and late in the day when they chase them away from the shelves and, using team tactics, corner them along the shoreline. Anglers working the shallow edge of a lake during these time periods have the best opportunity at these briefly vulnerable biggies. Since the banks are predominantly steep, scout from above with polarized glasses to locate fish.

While multi-colored Marabou Muddler, Matuka, Zonker and



Woolly Bugger streamers in sizes 8 to 10 best copy this highly sought baitfish, I have found tiny minnow-imitating plugs to be effective, especially when dragged slowly along the bottom and parallel to shore. Rainbow-finish Rapala and Rebels, silver Flatfish and yellow Bingo Bugs best replicate bite-sized naturals found here. I doctor my plugs with red or yellow indelible ink to replicate redbreast coloration.

Maria and Wong concur that waters containing freshwater shrimp in combination with a prodigious, well-endowed aquatic smorgasbord allow their residents to gain additional heft. While these conditions persist in a few well-spaced backcountry Sierra Nevada and Cascade locales, they apparently reach their zenith in Kirman Lake, a

specially regulated lake (16-inch minimum size, two-fish limit, artificials with barbless hooks) located 17 miles north of Bridgeport. Sitting in a bowl-like depression and surrounded by open sage-covered hills, this 70-acre body of water routinely grows leviathans incredibly fast and to football-shaped proportions. An amazingly dense shrimp population that, according to Wong, approaches 200 to 500 per square foot in some instances, is probably responsible. Gorging freely on this thickly concentrated, high-caloric crustacean, most residents average between 14 and 16 inches and 3 to 6 pounds with girth often proportional to length! "Though Kirman fish only live about four to five years, they tend to max out between 16 to 18 inches and 4 to

Chris Vachini's 17-inch 3-pound Kirman Lake brook trout set the National Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame's unlimited line-class world record. Author Don Vachini, three sons and one daughter collectively hold 13 line- or tippet-class records for brook trout. Photo by Don Vachini.

4 1/2 pounds. However," he adds, "5- to 6-pounders are also quite common, with 7-pounders not unheard of. This is an absolutely amazing growth pattern!"

Most anglers find that float tubes allow them to cover the best structural points. These include the dropoffs just outside the reed line, the springs next to the lone pine tree and the deeper section next to the beaver dam. Orange, red and green

scud patterns best duplicate the most common phases of the shrimp here. Since the overly abundant scuds are photophobic, working imitations from lighter to darker areas utilizing a sink-and-draw technique is often productive. Green-and-silver Marabou or olive, green or orange leech patterns are popular fly choices that can be quite productive when trolled or stripped at varying depths. Since the take is often quite noticeable, keep the rod tip pointed at the fly and at surface level to aid in an efficient hookset.

While size 6 Panther Martins, Vibrax, Hot Shot, Bingo Bugs and Z-Rays in fluorescent orange and green are popular artificials, my pet producer is a size 3-5 firetiger-finish Rapala worked erratically while wading the shallow flats in the fall.

Despite their voracious appetite, large brookies can be surprisingly difficult to fool, probably because there is so much food available. Once hooked, bringing them to net can prove to be another dilemma. Exceptions to the former occur during early spring right after ice-out and again in late fall just before spawning. There are none for the latter.

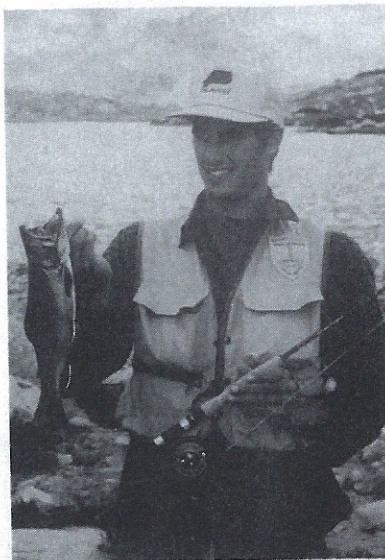
Less than an hour before sunset on a crisp October '94 afternoon, my son Chris and I intercepted a school of 30 or so brookies finning back and forth just outside a small opening in the weeds near Kirman's beaver dam. Several of our initial retrieves were met with a savage, slashing strike from the side, as if to nudge the "intruder" away. Upon feeling the sting of steel, one fish in particular immediately bolted into the stalky weeds in a freedom-seeking venture. Testing both tackle and nerves, the 3 1/2-pounder bore through the reeds like a buffalo through canebrush, swimming out on its own only when pressure was relaxed!

Of the trio of line-class world records we landed and released before darkness forced us to depart, rosette-pocked blue halos and squiggly vermiculations attested to species status while their bulbous 17-inch bodies served as a reminder that, beyond a doubt, Kirman is California's quintessential manufacturer of "footballs"!

BIGFOOT TROPHIES

The Sierra Nevada does not hold a monopoly on jumbo brookies as the

northwestern corner of the state houses some well-guarded, difficult-to-reach fishin' holes. This sector is dominated by the Cascade Range, which includes the Salmon, Scott and Trinity sub-ranges, an immense, thickly forested mountain country famous for over 300 lakes and legends of Bigfoot, the fabled beast. Gouged out by glacial action over 10,000 years ago and cleansed by springs and snowmelt that eventually reaches the Klamath River, the average elevation of these lakes is much lower than the lofty Sierra.



Jason Vachini's 1-pound, 6-ounce brookie set the Fishing Hall of Fame's 14-pound tippet class world record. Photo by Don Vachini.

Maria ascertains the biggest surprise is the overall size of the trout in these pristine settings, which average 11 inches and up, with 15- to 18-inchers likely in some of the more inaccessible lakes. "Since the average elevation in these mountains runs between 5,000 and 6,000 feet, there is much greater terrestrial productivity throughout," he informs. "Due to the lower elevations, there is more soil and vegetation, trees, algae and insect hatches — in general, more life."

Since trout here feed on a plethora of insects, black and crown gnat, Coachman, Serendipity and Chirnonmid patterns in sizes 10-16 have proved to be solid choices. Personally, I favor the Flying Ant, which duplicates the large wood ants found around many of these lakes. Although shoreline vegetation can be dense, a fly/bubble setup not only

eliminates tricky backcasts, but allows for lengthier casts.

While a good number of Bigfoot waters are adjacent to well-maintained trail systems, Maria hints that some of the remote lakes are seldom visited, in part due to radical scrambles over ridges choked with shoulder-high brush and steep, unmarked trails with endless switchbacks necessary to reach them. "You'd better be in good shape and know something about mountain travel," he warns.

Ranging from moderate to nearly impossible to reach, noteworthy wilderness waters such as the Boulder lakes, Telephone, Little Crater, Upper Deadfall and Dobkins lakes, range from 2 to 70 acres and house skimpily populated fish in the 12- to 16-inch range.

DRIVE-TO WATERS

Not all waters with big brookies are isolated. A small cluster of waters within the short radius of the Mammoth Lakes Basin have achieved a reputation for producing some head-turning specimens. Although all are more famous for brown trout and abundantly planted rainbows, Twin Lake, reached via the paved Lake Mary Road from downtown Mammoth, has maintained anonymity while annually producing brookies up to 3 pounds. Actually one lake with two segments, it is one of the richest bodies in the area, as evidenced by its heavy weed growth. Prams and canoes are helpful in negotiating the weedy tangles that often choke most of the surface by summer's end. This growth can be worked with damselfly nymphs and olive, green, black and purple Woolly Buggers, while size 8 to 18 streamers laced with red and towed behind a floating craft are often very effective. Nymphal stages of caddis and callibaetis mayflies, additionally important supplemental food sources, are best imitated by size 12-18 Zug Bug, Adams and Hare's Ear patterns. The dropoff line where weed bloom diminishes often provides a good ambush point.

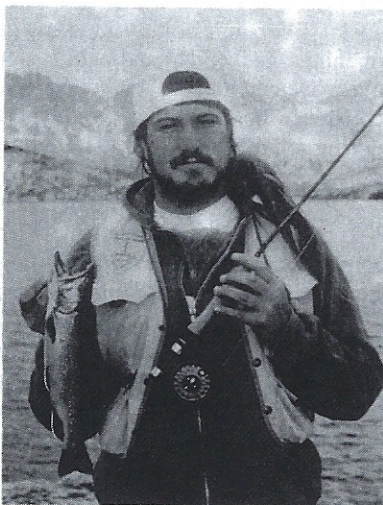
Located 15 miles to the north, a pair of June Lake Loop waters possess small numbers of sizeable brook trout. While 80-acre Silver Lake contains fish up to 3 pounds and produced the state-record 9-

Continued on page 52

BROOK TROUT ... Continued

pound, 12-ouncer in 1932, tiny 64-acre Gull Lake has yielded an IGFA line-class record as recently as 1988. The monster, caught by Eric Petersen, ran 7 pounds, 12 ounces. Both waters, which sit adjacent Highway 158 (the June Lake Loop Road), pretty much require a boat to work structure. Downrigger trolling along the edge of reeds with flashy, deep-running Pro Secrets, Bingo Bugs, Humdinger, Swiss Blinkers and Crippures is highly recommended although patient shore-anglers soaking salmon eggs, inflated 'crawlers or Power Bait can also randomly score.

Growing conditions here greatly favor brookies putting on bulk. The region benefits in a big way from winter storms, which are tracked through low-lying Mammoth Pass, delivering moisture to an otherwise arid east slope. The resultant vegetational swath accounts for fantastic aquatic and insect populations. Although a bane to light leaders and tippets, prodigious underwater growth at this trio of lakes actually becomes an ally to the



Another Hall of Fame world record is Matt Vachini's 1-pound, 8-ounce brookie, taken on 16-pound tippet. Photo by Don Vachini.

trout, enabling them to reach outsized proportions.

TACKLE TIMING

A full sinking or sink-tip line matched with a 5- or 6-weight outfit is best suited to reach the bottom huggers; heavier tippets are often advisable to keep fish from reaching underwater obstacles such as weed beds, large rocks or sunken logs.

For the spin-fisher, an ultralight rod and reel loaded with 4- to 6-pound line is a very sporting outfit to probe slow-moving, deep-running spoons, spinners or plugs.

While gossamer lines possibly add strikes, heftier tippets or leaders help coax chunky trout away from underwater obstacles. I personally favor thin diameter lines, which test higher, for a bit more persuasion power.

Though ravenous right after ice-out, the monster fish are particularly vulnerable later in the fall when they not only gorge voraciously in anticipation of spawning but become highly territorial and aggressive. Hiking into the rugged Trinity Alps a week before the season's closing, I had targeted a 12-acre lake nestled just above the 6,000-foot elevation. Orange, yellow and bronze painted the hardwoods, while a light snow dusted the landscape. The shallow inlet held maybe a dozen brookies lined up across the channel, their black-and-white-edged fins flaring in the early-morning light as they squabbled amongst themselves in the foot-deep shallows. Meticulously dabbing a weighted bead head while

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kneeling just beyond them, I was able to hook, land and release a quartet of potbellied, 1-pound bruisers without spooking the others. Actually becoming more belligerent toward one another, the school created a noticeable disturbance in the narrow waterway, twice attacking a hooked fish as it struggled through their domain!

Over the past six years, my daughter Angela, sons Chris, Matt, Jason and I have strapped on daypacks or shouldered backpacks to follow the mystic allure of *Salvelinus fontinalis* while prospecting their Sierra and Cascade ranges. In addition to enjoying a blessed camaraderie of family fishing, we have also been fortunate to have amassed an aggregate 13 line-, or tippet-class species standard with the HOF.

NOTEWORTHY SECRET SPOTS

Representing somewhat fragile resources, there are other little-known waters dotting both east and west slopes of the Sierra Crest. Crater Lake, located near Florence Lake in the Sierra National Forest; Mesa, Lost and the Wahoo lakes, in Humphrey's Basin; plus East, West, Peeler and Barney lakes, in the Hoover Wilderness, are a few with specimens occasionally approaching 2 pounds. Reputable Bridgeport area information can be obtained from Rick Rockel of Ken's Alpine Sporting Goods, at (619) 932-7707, while Hoover Wilderness maps can be ordered from the Toiyabe National Forest office by calling (619) 932-7070.

For Sierra south information, contact DFG biologists Darrell Wong, at (619) 872-1171, or Dale Mitchell, at (209) 222-3761. John Muir Wilderness maps can be obtained from the Sierra National Forest headquarters by calling (209) 487-4155.

Hard-to-access Trinity lakes, Babs, Red Cap, Mavis, Tangle Blue and Bull, possess slim densities of fish averaging 13 to 14 inches but occasionally pushing 3 pounds. Angling advice for northwestern California can be obtained from the Shasta Cascade Wonderland Association, at 1-800-326-6944, from Mike Rode at the DFG Region 1 headquarters, at (916) 225-2362, or from Dennis Maria at the Yreka

DFG office, at (916) 842-3249. For map information on the Marble Mountain or Trinity Alps wilderness areas, contact the Shasta/Trinity National Forest headquarters, at (916) 246-5222.

The Caribou Wilderness, located on the eastern slope of Mt. Lassen, contains a few productive waters. Sitting on a forested plateau along the boundary of Lassen National Park, Gem and Long lakes have produced brookies up to 18 inches.

Rising from the drab, high-desert chaparral and forming the headwaters of the mighty Pit River,

the Warners are a mini-mountain range resting east of Alturas. Tucked deep within the lightly visited South Warner Wilderness, a trio of extremely fragile lakes contain populations approaching 14 inches. The Caribou Wilderness is part of the Lassen National Forest (916/257-2151). For angling information on this wilderness or the Warner Mountains, contact Paul Chappell at (916) 254-6363. Warner Wilderness maps can be obtained via the Modoc National Forest headquarters by calling (916) 233-4611. □



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